

June 02, 2006

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Cusack Finds State of Grace

"Well, I guess we were due for this," said Grace Loh, looking out at the constant rainfall on a recent late spring day on a quiet street in La Grange. Loh, one of the producers of "Grace Is Gone," starring John Cusack, was talking about the fact that "for this entire shoot in the Chicago area, we've not had one glitch due to weather -- until today."

The rain didn't faze Cusack, sitting in his trailer near a house being used for scenes -- the home of his character's estranged brother, played by Alessandro Nivola ("Junebug"), who has flown into Chicago for just a couple of days of filming for his role. "Come on! This is Chicago. We're due for some bad weather. It just makes things interesting," Cusack said with a chuckle.

No, talking about the weather was not on the actor's mind that day. He was anxious to explain why "Grace Is Gone" is such a personal project -- one that Cusack said is "one of the most important things I've done in quite a while."

Written by James C. Strouse, who makes his directorial debut with "Grace Is Gone," the film is about Stanley Phillips (Cusack), a former military officer who takes his two young daughters on an impulsive road trip to an amusement park after learning his soldier wife, Grace, has been killed in Iraq. The film chronicles the two days when Stanley can't bring himself to share the devastating news with his girls -- believing their trip to a Disney World-like park will give them one final, untainted memory.

Showing Iraq war's human cost

Though Strouse wrote the screenplay with Cusack in mind, the actor said, "That happens a lot, and for a lot of actors, but unfortunately -- at least in my case -- those scripts often aren't very good. This was a big exception." More important to the politically aware Evanston native was something he believed the film could accomplish for him.

It provided him a way to express his strong feelings about the war in Iraq, "but something I could do in an artistic way." For Cusack, who long has been vocal in his opposition to the war and his distaste for many Bush administration policy decisions, "Grace Is Gone" was a way to present "a story about the human costs of the war in Iraq. As a citizen and artist, besides voting and getting involved in the political system, there's not much you can do to express your outrage and contempt for the situation."

It was a relatively small news story that jumped out at Cusack, captured his attention and focused him on a process that ultimately led to making "Grace Is Gone" for the big screen.

One day while watching the news, the actor heard how the administration "was going to ban photos of the dead coming home. When I found out that this was official policy, I thought this was one of the most brazen, hideous and cowardly political acts I had seen."

Cusack believes that no matter whether one is for or against the U.S. military action in Iraq, "the idea that they would censor the coffins coming in, like they didn't exist, was pretty outrageous." That feeling led the actor to search for a movie project that would showcase what happens when the coffins do come home.

"I wanted to make a film that personalizes this kind of tragedy -- which, by the way, is a tragedy on all sides, for Arabs as well as Americans, of course."

Liberal as a conservative

In many ways, Cusack says, "the screenplay James Strouse wrote is far more restrained than I'm showing now talking about my feelings about the war, but it works beautifully and tells a simple story about how ordinary, good people are affected by the tragedy of war."

One irony of the film: The views of his character are in many ways the opposite of Cusack's own views. Stanley supports the war effort and is conservative.

The filming the Sun-Times observed in La Grange featured an emotional scene around his brother's dining room table with both of Stanley's daughters present. Nivola's character (as Stanley's brother) shares the feelings that Cusack would more likely be expressing, if this were a real situation and not a fictional one.

But that's what it means to be an actor -- to go out and create a personality that has nothing to do with who you are yourself," Cusack said.

An added bonus to making "Grace Is Gone" was the opportunity for the actor and producer to make yet another film in Chicago and the surrounding area. Not only is it home for Cusack, but "you have such great crews, great locations here. I love being home. You pick up the Chicago papers in the morning. You go to restaurants and clubs where you can feel comfortable. You see friends and family, go to Cubs and Sox games. It's just great to be in Chicago."

Just then came a knock on the trailer door. For John Cusack it was time to go back to work and become "a man whose life I'm glad I never have to live -- for real. I can't imagine how difficult it would be tell my children -- if I had them -- that their mother was killed, especially under circumstances like fighting a war that shouldn't have been fought in the first place."